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ABSTRACT

This report stresses the need to incorporate various methods of teaching as a means of developing an integrated curriculum to address the lack of phonetic skills amongst second grade and kindergarten students. The target population of Site A consisted of a kindergarten classroom in a medium-sized district of a growing middle class community located in a northeastern suburb of Illinois. The target population of Site B was two second grade classrooms located in the same community. Evidence for the existence of the problem included the deficiency of skills from assessments that indicated students' academic performance, teacher observations, and anecdotal records. Analysis of probable cause data revealed a lack of curriculum focus in the area of phonetic instruction. Teachers observed incoming students' lack of retention and transferring skills. The skills taught in the reading curriculum did not meet all students' needs. Possible solutions that were explored in this project included: whole language instruction, basal series lessons, and individualized instruction. Through this process of engaged learning the researchers have examined, analyzed, incorporated, and assessed the learning and transfer of skills of the targeted groups for further commentary. The results of the action research project were favorable. Using supplemental phonics instruction showed that relevant application of skills presented in an active learning environment might have led to meaningful discovery and student success. Students were enthusiastic and looked forward to learning upon entering school each day. Students who get fragmented pieces of knowledge rarely gain understanding. For students to maximize their potential and be successful in life they have to understand that knowledge is life. This understanding will be the foundation needed for students to grow and be life-long learners. Teacher questionnaire is attached. (Contains 30 references and 5 tables.) (Author/RS)

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IMPROVING READING SKILLS THROUGH PHONICS INSTRUCTION IN THE PRIMARY GRADES

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An Action Research Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the

School of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching and Leadership

Saint Xavier University

Field-Based Master's Program

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Authors: Jessica Brackemyer, Debra Fuca, and Karen Suarez

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ABSTRACT

The following report stresses the need to incorporate various methods of teaching as a means of developing an integrated curriculum to address the lack of phonetic skills amongst second grade and kindergarten students. The target population of Site A consisted of a kindergarten classroom in a medium-sized district of a growing middle class community located in a northeastern suburb of Illinois. The target population of Site B was two-second grade classrooms located in the same community. Evidence for the existence of the problem included the deficiency of skills from assessments that indicated students' academic performance, teacher observations, and anecdotal records.

Analysis of the probable cause data revealed a lack of curriculum focus in the area of phonetic instruction. Teachers observed incoming students' lack of retention and transferring skills. The skills taught in the reading curriculum did not meet all students' needs. A review of the literature further substantiated these views.

Upon the examination of the literature and the possible solutions to the dilemma of lack of phonetic skills, it was evident that a supplemental phonics curriculum had an effect on students' academic achievement. Enhanced learning occurred when changes were implemented in the delivery of the curriculum. Possible solutions that were explored in this project included: whole language instruction, basal series lessons, and individualized instruction. Through this process of engaged learning the researchers have examined, analyzed, incorporated, and assessed the learning and transfer of skills of the targeted groups for further commentary.

The results of the action research project were favorable. Using supplemental phonics instruction showed that relevant application of skills presented in an active learning environment might have led to meaningful discovery and student success. Students were enthusiastic and looked forward to learning upon entering school each day. Students who get fragmented pieces of knowledge rarely gain understanding. For students to maximize their potential and be successful in life they have to understand that knowledge is life. This understanding will be the foundation needed for students to grow and be life-long learners.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1- PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT 1

General Statement of the Problem 1

Immediate Problem Context 1

The Surrounding Community 6

National Context of the Problem. 7

CHAPTER 2- PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION 9

Problem Evidence 9

Probable Causes 11

CHAPTER 3- THE SOLUTION STRATEGY 16

Literature Review 16

Projective Objectives and Processess 22

Project Action Plan 24

Methods of Assessment 29

CHAPTER 4- PROJECT RESULTS 31

Historical Description of the Intervention. 31

Presentation and Analysis of Results. 33

Conclusions and Recommendations 35

REFERENCES 38

APPENDIX 41

CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

The students in the targeted kindergarten and second grade classes in a small mid-western community exhibited a reading deficiency that interfered with their academic growth. Evidence for the existence of the problem included student's writing samples, records that documented reading skills and difficulties, and assessments that indicated the level of student academic performance.

Immediate Problem Context

School A

School "A" was unique in being one of two new elementary school facilities. Each staff member was new to the building, in a school serving kindergarten through third grade. Together with three other elementary schools, this school fed into the only existing middle and high school in the district. The school consisted of 8 third grade, 8 second grade, 9 first grade, and 4 kindergarten classrooms. There were 4 physical education, 3 music, and 2 art classrooms. The school administration consisted of a principal, an assistant principal, and a wing leader.

School "A" had a variety of teachers and staff with different educational experiences and areas of expertise. Of a faculty consisting of 58 teachers, 12 were new

additions to the building; 4% of the educators have attained tenure within the school district, while 27.7% have achieved a master's degree. This dedication and length of time in the district has pushed the average teaching salary to $35,350. Each building also contained many specialized workers that make the school run effectively: teacher's aides, lunchroom supervisors, and office personnel.

School "A" had a student population of 892 with an average class size of 22 pupils. Having a variety of students from different ethnic groups, this was the percentage breakdown for the students in School "A": 87.8% Caucasian, 2.3% African-American, 6.3% Hispanic, 3.0% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.5% Native American. With a diverse student population, School "A" maintained an attendance rate of 94.5% with a truancy rate of 0.4%.

The elementary school has tried to implement a strong reading curriculum throughout each grade level utilizing a variety of teaching strategies. Implementation of literature circles, learning centers, and guided reading instruction are tools being utilized. These strategies used by School "A" have aligned with the balanced literacy program to the Illinois State Standards. Guided reading was implemented throughout the grade levels as the main reading program for students to achieve reading success. Guided Reading is a reading instruction strategy where same ability, small groups meet with the teacher. The teacher supports each reader's development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty. The text is one that offers the children a minimum of new things to learn, ensuring success and allowing the reader to fully concentrate on the strategy being taught. The reading teachers at school "A" developed a program called "Students and Friends Achieving Reading Independence

(S.A.F.A.R.I.)" for struggling readers. This is a pull out program that works in conjunction with the classroom guided reading instruction. Students are pulled out three to four times per week with students of the same ability to work on reading strategies. This program offers assistance to students not receiving special education services.

Mathematics, science, social studies, character education, reading and writing are the fundamental subjects that are taught across all grade levels at School "A". Students are also offered a variety of extra-curricular classes that enhance their learning: physical education, music, computer lab, and art. Depending on the grade level of the student, each student will attend an enrichment class for a specific amount of time. Kindergartners attend art and music once per week, while students in physical education class attend daily. Teaching the fundamental subjects, along with offering a wide range of enrichment classes, allowed each student to become a more diversified learner.

School "A" had concerns of developing a school wide discipline plan for the building. With the growth happening at the school, there was a concern that discipline would not be handled consistently throughout the building without a plan in place.

School "B"

School "B" was the second of the new teaching facilities in the district, serving pre-kindergarten through third grade. This school is one of three elementary schools that feed into the districts only middle school and high school. The school consisted of 8 third grade, 8 second grade, 9 first grade, and 4 kindergarten classrooms.

School "B" had a variety of teachers and staff with different educational experience and area of expertise. Of a faculty consisting of 59 teachers, 15 were new editions to the building: 4% of the educators have attained tenure within the school

district, while 27.7% have achieved a master's degree. This dedication and length of time in the district has pushed the average teaching salary to $35,350. Each building also contained many specialized workers that make the school run effectively: teacher's aides, lunchroom supervisors, and office personnel.

School "B" had a student population of 902 with an average class size of 22 pupils. Having a variety of students from different ethnic groups, this was the percentage breakdown for the students in School "B": 86.8% Caucasian, 1.2% African-American, 7.0% Hispanic, 3.3% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.9% Native American. With a diverse student population, School "B" maintained an attendance rate of 95.3% with a truancy rate of 0.3 %.

The elementary school has tried to implement a strong reading curriculum throughout each grade level utilizing a variety of teaching strategies. Implementation of literature circles, learning centers, and guided reading instruction are tools being utilized. These strategies used by School "B" have aligned with the balanced literacy program to the Illinois State Standards. Guided reading was implemented throughout the grade levels as the main reading program for students to achieve reading success. Guided Reading is a reading instruction strategy where same ability, small groups meet with the teacher. The teacher supports each reader's development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty. The text is one that offers the children a minimum of new things to learn, ensuring success and allowing the reader to fully concentrate on the strategy being taught. The reading teachers at school "B" developed a program called "Students and Teachers Achieving Reading Success" (S.T.A.R.S.) for struggling readers. This is a pull out program that works in conjunction

with the classroom guided reading instruction. Students are pulled out three to four times per week with students of the same ability to work on reading strategies. This program offers assistance to students not receiving special education services.

Mathematics, science, social studies, character education, reading and writing are the fundamental subjects that are taught across all grade levels at School "B". Students are also offered a variety of extra-curricular classes that enhance their learning: physical education, music, computer lab, and art. Depending on the grade level of the student, each student will attend an enrichment class for a specific amount of time. Kindergartners attend art and music once per week, while students in physical education class attend daily. Teaching the fundamental subjects, along with offering a wide range of enrichment classes, allowed each student to become a more diversified learner.

School "B" had concerns of developing a school improvement plan for the new building. To create a mission and a shared vision that promotes a positive interaction among students, School "B" developed a school wide discipline plan that all teachers follow, as well as a school wide character education program. The teachers put together a Character Counts program promoting character education. Each month, a character trait is highlighted and discussed in the classrooms. Activities are displayed month-long in the hallways as visual reminders to the students. A program to utilize the blacktop on the playground, called Peaceful Playground, was also created. This allows for systematic games to be played along with use of the playground equipment. Students are taught and encouraged to work out social problems on their own. These plans have effectively addressed the need for the students to work cooperatively.

The Surrounding Community

The targeted schools were located in a rapidly growing area near major highways in a Northwestern Chicago suburb. New residential land developments accounted for much of the population growth of this community. These developments have attracted an increasing number of families with school-aged children.

The unified school district served four surrounding communities. Pre-school students through twelfth graders were taught in five buildings, consisting of three campuses. A new middle school and high school was opened in 1998 to meet the population demands of a growing community. The district was governed by a seven-member board of education. With the predicted growth for the district, several future referendums are on the horizon for additional buildings.

At the time this research was conducted, the estimated population was approximately 9,000; the estimated population of the communities that fed students into the school district was about 30,000. The area was a host to a large retirement community, vast farmland, manufacturing plants, and new homeowners that provided a large portion to the town's tax base. According to the school report card, the average household income at the time was $51,000 with a median home value estimated to be $125,000. Median tax rate, at the time of the study, was 8.0205%

The park district, closely involved with the local school district, offered a variety of programs that help out its patrons. Providing before and after school care, along with developing a teen center, were two programs that were a benefit to both, the children and parents of the community. Opportunities for family gatherings, town picnics, and county fairs were also available at this community. Other establishments in the area included

driving ranges, corporate restaurants, and a variety of small shops to maintain a small-town atmosphere.

Members of this growing community were concerned with a variety of issues. Traffic congestion, pollution, and the destruction of farmland were among the top concerns. Traffic congestion had increased dramatically due to the building of public schools and the influx of new families moving to this area. Increased traffic, along with factories being built, had brought potential pollution to the communities' attention. These issues, including the development of farmland, are three issues that the evolving community will have to encounter.

National Context

Concern over the increasing number of children with reading difficulties has been a state and national issue. Reading is the most important skill taught and learned by school children. Reading is the fundamental building block in education. If children do not develop efficient reading skills in the primary grades, they will experience difficulties in other curricular subjects (Chall, 1983). Children need to develop substantial-reading skills early in their academic careers.

Reading performance standards have been a national priority. National and international assessments indicate, as a nation, American students are among the world's best readers. Although this is an impressive statistic, there is still much work to be done. Reading researchers reported that nearly one-fifth of American students are so far behind in reading that they may never catch up (Clay, 1985). The goal of reading instruction is to allow students to become fluent readers and this goal must be attained before any other educational goal can be met.

Educators have been perplexed with the increasing number of poor readers in the classroom. Teachers say higher student enrollment, growing academic diversity, and a lack of parental support contribute to reading difficulties in children. Researchers have documented that social problems too often result when children are poor readers. Poor readers suffer humiliation in school and are more likely to drop out of high school (Mann, 1986). Early identification of reading difficulties and treatment of struggling students can make a profound difference in reading success.

It is known that the child who falls behind in reading is a child in serious trouble—in school and probably in life. Therefore, it is essential for classroom teachers to find what works in their classrooms. Research consistently shows children who get off to a good start in reading rarely stumble. Those who fall behind in reading tend to stay behind for the rest of their academic lives (Chase, 1998). Now is an excellent time to be taking the initiative in reading. Educators already know that some children are far more likely than others to have difficulty in learning to read. Teachers should be prepared to get these children the help they need before they fail in school, before they are labeled, and before costly remediation is necessary.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

The good that happens in America's classrooms this school year will be how well children read. The importance of successfully learning to read during the primary grades is critical. Reading is the first of the three R's: reading, writing, and arithmetic. Being educated depends on one's ability to read and decipher meaning. The consequences of failing to read in the primary grades are enduring and pervasive. The children who do not learn to read early in their school careers risk falling further behind in their development of literacy skills. An inability to read stands as an enormous barrier to one's potential knowledge and social participation. The question that has stumped educators over the past decade is: Why are children having such a difficult time learning to read? The following data collected from educators, students, and literacy experts offer insight into why some children exhibit reading deficiencies.

In analyzing the context, one might note that the local population of the community was steadily increasing. Many new students were entering the district; it was estimated that enrollment of the district had increased by 100 students each school year. This population growth had strained the district's school's resources, as there were more

students than school textbooks in some classrooms. Transitions for these students could have been difficult because their past learning experiences may not have aligned with the district's curriculum and school scheduling.

Scheduling within the schools did not permit uninterrupted, daily reading instruction. Students were required to attend classes such as physical education, art, music, computer instruction and library several times throughout the week. Teachers at these schools were faced with limited opportunities to implement reading instruction. Given the number of students within the school system, and the required classes to fulfill the state learning standards, reading instruction was often interrupted, hindering student reading achievement. Reading instruction was not balanced among shared readings, phonetic development activities, comprehension building, and guided reading groups. Teachers had to resort to choosing one activity over another, and phonics was not always prioritized. With reading time limited by schedule demands, teachers were forced to rely on parents at home to provide additional reading support for their children.

Children need parental support to successfully develop as readers. Reading instruction at home is necessary; however, many children attending schools in the district did not receive adequate reading support from their parents. Many parents were too busy to visit the public library or had too many at home responsibilities to help their children read on a daily basis. Many households also did not provide children with opportunities to read materials such as books, magazines, and newspapers. Parents must not only listen to their child read aloud but they must also work with the print to help develop their children's reading skills and strategies.

Probable Causes

The past five years have brought major breakthroughs in the knowledge of how children learn to read and why so many fail. The literature suggests specific causes for reading deficiencies in primary students. A summary of data from the 1994 National Association of Education Progress revealed that ten million American children are considered poor readers (Lewis, 1997).

A survey developed by the researchers (Appendix A) was administered throughout their grade level teams. Of the 12 kindergarten and second grade teachers surveyed, few taught phonics directly during reading instruction. A summary of the results of frequency of reading instruction strategies used is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Number of Grade Level Team Members Using Reading Instruction

Reading Instruction Strategy Used	Always	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
Daily Independent Reading	5	3	3	1
Skill and Strategy Lessons	8	2	2	0
Phonics Skills During Reading Instruction	3	5	4	0

Of the 12 teachers surveyed, 33% seldom included direct phonics skills during reading instruction. Further analysis indicated that teachers felt that there was not sufficient time allotted to accommodate these crucial reading elements daily. Only 25% of teachers always stressed phonics skills during reading instruction.

Among the causes of poor reading are large class sizes, diverse academic abilities, and lack of parental support, all of which work against the efforts to teach children to

read successfully. Unfortunately it is not always easy for teachers to recognize students with reading difficulties. When students are identified, teachers find themselves caught between conflicting schools of thought about how to treat reading disabilities. One school of thought gives considerable attention to the teaching of phonics in the early stages of reading. Another school of thought emphasizes the whole language approach. The U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Child and Human Development have supported the hundreds of studies done in recent years on reading instruction related to disabilities. This body of research suggests that the relatively recent change away from phonics instruction to a whole language approach is making it more difficult to keep children with reading deficiencies out of the downward learning spiral (Lewis, 1997).

Few dispute the value of giving children opportunities to write, surrounding children with good literature, and generally creating a rich literary environment for students; for many children, this may not be enough. Some children will have continuing difficulties with reading unless they master the decoding skills associated with phonics instruction. Reading is not a skill that can be acquired through immersion alone. Beginning readers benefit from instruction that helps them understand that the words they speak and hear can be represented by written symbols (Bauman & Hoffman, 1998). Skills in decoding and phonological analysis are necessary to make children successful readers. Researchers have come to conclusions regarding how students reading problems occur. Longitudinal studies have measured the ability of children to recognize individual words in text. Their data suggest that more than one child in six will encounter a problem in learning to read during the crucial first three years of school (Groff, 1998). Further

evidence suggests that most non-readers share a common problem because they have not mastered the decoding skills associated with phonics.

An assessment developed by The Wright Group was given to help establish a baseline score for how students perform phonetically. Of the 50 students assessed, a high number of students performed below grade level in phonics. A summary of the number of students performing above and below grade level is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Number of Second Grade Students Above or Below Grade Level on Phonetic Pre-Assessment

Phonetic Concept	At or Above Grade Level*	Below Grade Level*
Vowel Digraphs	23	27
Vowel Variants	22	28
Vowel Diphthongs	24	26
R-Controlled Vowels	20	30

*Grade Level is defined by a score of 75% or above on the pre-assessment.

Of the 50 students involved in the pre-assessment, 52% had a score of 75% or below for vowel diphthongs. The weakest phonetic concept was r-controlled vowels where 60% scored below grade level. Further analysis of the scores indicated that overall, more than 50% of second graders performed below grade level phonetically.

Of the 22 students in the targeted kindergarten class, several students performed below grade level in phonics. A summary of the number of students performing above and below grade level is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Number of Kindergarten Students Above or Below Grade Level on Phonetic Pre-Assessment

Phonetic Concept	At or Above Grade Level*	Below Grade Level*
Whole Word Discrimination	9	13
Rhyming Words – Recognition	9	13
Rhyming Words – Application	5	17
Syllable Counting	2	20

*Grade Level is defined by a score of 75% or above on the pre-assessment.

Of the 22 students involved in the pre-assessment, 59% had a score of 75% or below for the whole word discrimination and rhyming word recognition. The weakest phonetic concept was syllable counting where 91% scored below grade level. Further analysis of the scores indicated that overall, more than 50% of kindergartners performed below grade level phonetically.

Today, the role of phonics in reading has become as much a political issue as it has an educational one. The debate is being fueled by the perception that United States reading achievement has declined because of whole language instruction. For example, Berliner (1997) commented on how a conservative educational watchdog group reported that whole language has caused serious decline in reading achievement. On the basis of declining reading achievement test scores, several states are trying to return to phonics (Hancock & Wingert, 1996). Steps taken include legislation bills or Department of Education policies in a dozen or more states that mandate phonics be a part of the

elementary reading curriculum.

Perhaps it is because of its educational importance that there are so many disparate beliefs about the nature of the reading process and how it should be taught. Research now suggests that people's knowledge of phonology is a critical factor in whether or not a person learns to read well. If there is an absence of such knowledge, a person may experience difficulties with reading. The phonological structure of words is a key component of the reading process. If a child does not know or recognize the sounds that individual letters make, reading progress for that child may be slowed down. Children with reading deficiencies are found to benefit most when given reading instruction emphasizing decoding and word recognition skills (Adams & Henry, 1997).

Reading is the gateway to learning. Understanding and using written language has always been a prerequisite to the acquisition of knowledge and is becoming increasingly important in today's informational society. In the past, it may have been possible for persons who were illiterate to obtain a good job, support a family, and live a comfortable life, but those days are gone. Children who do not learn to read today can expect to live on the margins of society. Beginning readers need to develop a functional command of what is commonly called phonics. Phonological awareness, or the awareness of the sounds that make up words, are both a precursor to and a product of reading. Research suggests that the best plan may be to teach phonics in the context of reading to all children who exhibit reading deficiencies (Stahl, 1992).

CHAPTER 3

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

Reading is the gateway skill; without the necessary abilities to read, children will not be able to advance into all other learning areas. All of the learning areas depend on reading. Low reading achievement is not a new problem, but rather one that has been around since teachers have opened up their doors to educate students (Sweet, 1996).

The history of reading instruction can be separated into three eras. The first era ran from colonial times until late in the nineteenth century. The process of reading instruction was simple and straightforward. The philosophy was to teach the phonetic skills, and then have the children read. Prominent professors such as Horace Mann and John Dewey began rejecting teaching phonics on the belief that it was a boring approach to the teaching of reading (Sweet, 1996).

The second era began at the turn of the twentieth century and lasted until the late 1960s. Horace Mann's philosophy of reading instruction was adopted. Students were expected to memorize commonly used words. New words were added each year. By the end of fourth grade, students held approximately 1,500 words in their memory (Sweet, 1996). During the 1930s, publishers began selling books that focused on a "look and

say" approach to reading. This led to the slow but inevitable phasing out of phonics and to the rise of illiteracy. By the 1950s, parents of children who could not read well were told that their children needed reading assistance. This knowledge paved the way into the third era of reading.

The third era began in the 1970s and is still practiced today. This new reading practice is known as whole language. Whole language, as defined by Patrick Groff (1998), is whole word memorization that is linked to authentic literature books the children are required to read. Theorists believed that children learn to read in the same way they learn to talk. The belief was that since humans were all born with the ability to read, it was only necessary to provide children with books and read to them. With whole language, no longer were the most commonly used words memorized, as was the case with the "look and say" readers. Despite the stories of "Dick and Jane," children learned to memorize certain words that made it possible to function quite well. Whole language took the country to new depths of reading inability because memorization of difficult words in primary grades is virtually impossible for a large percentage of students (Sweet, 1996).

During the 1980s, teachers adopted aspects of whole language because such changes made sense and enhanced their instruction. However, to assert that teachers abandoned phonics and other skill instruction in the process of employing more holistic practices is inaccurate (Bauman & Hoffman, 1998). One of the most frustrating aspects of the debate over whole language is mischaracterized as merely turning children loose to do their own thing, with little support or guidance from the teacher. Whole language is, in fact, a balanced and mainstream approach to teaching and learning (Zemelman,

Daniels, & Hyde, 1998). NICHD research supports practices advocated by whole language. Whole language emphasizes reading to children and providing them with abundant exposure to text (Swerling, 1998). Advocates of whole language suggest that phonics should be taught in the context of reading and writing activities and not be isolated. Materials such as worksheets and flashcards are considered inappropriate. Instead, the teaching of skills emerges naturally from activities in which the class is engaged (Morrow, 1997).

Though whole language teaching involves much more than a different approach to reading and writing, one key element of whole language classrooms is that children receive the support they need to read and write whole texts and to develop reading and writing skills within meaningful reading and writing situations (Olofsson & Niedersoe, 1999). This includes explicit help on developing phonics knowledge and decoding skills. Part of what many whole language teachers do in the primary grades is spend significant time each day reading to children from a large text that all can see, then rereading the text with the children chiming in. By teaching phonics through reading, mini-lessons, and writing, whole language teachers help children develop phonics knowledge in the context of the texts they enjoy reading and writing. Children in whole language classrooms are more inclined to read for meaning than just to identify words and they are better at retelling what they have read. They also develop more strategies for dealing with problems in treading, such as problems identifying words (Oloffson & Neidersoe, 1999). Children in whole language classrooms develop greater independence as readers and writers and a stronger sense of themselves as readers and writers. Advocates of whole language instruction have been discouraged to find that over the last decade, opinion has

moved against them. Children do not learn to read they way they learn to talk (Wagstaff, 1994). Speech is a natural human capacity and learning to talk requires little more than exposure. In contrast, written language is an artifact, and reading is not a skill that can be acquired through immersion alone. Beginning readers benefit from instruction that helps them understand that the words they speak and hear can be represented by written symbols, and that letters and the sounds associated with them, when combined and recombined, form words, just as they benefit from experiences that make reading fun.

Few dispute the value of giving children opportunities to write, surrounding children with good literature, and generally creating a rich literate environment for students. But for many children this is not enough. Such children will have continued difficulty with reading unless they master the decoding skills associated with phonics instruction (Reading, 2000).

Alternately, a "middle-of-the-road" approach to instruction is most often used. The best strategy may be an integration of both whole language and explicit phonics approaches (Morrow & Tracey, 1997). With a combined approach, phonics instruction includes functional experiences, as well as explicit, systematic instruction.

Whole language should not be debated with phonics. Rather, the debate should be in terms of which specific instruction practices are most useful with which children, at which stages of development (Swerling, 1998). Using predictable and decodable text and authentic children's literature can be useful when looking at developmentally appropriate instruction techniques.

The debate over whole language versus phonics continues. Realistically, most classrooms contain a great mixture of student needs and abilities. Most teachers said they

used an eclectic approach that incorporates elements of both phonics and whole language (Baumann & Hoffman, 1998). Students' needs vary, and different approaches need to be taken. Teachers today use what works best at the time for the group of children they are currently teaching.

Today, educators are in the middle of a phonics revolution. Research has shown that whole language has led to a decline in reading scores (Mills, O'Keefe, & Stephens, 1992). As a result, many schools are returning to a phonics approach to the teaching of reading.

Phonics can be defined as the process of linking sounds to the symbols that stand for them (Foorman, 1995). When students apply phonics, they use phonics information to convert letters and words into speech sounds (e.g. cat becomes /c/ -/a/-/t/.) The more phonics skills children acquire, the more aware they become of speech sounds.

If an instructor is going to focus on phonics and phonics instruction, he/she needs to teach children to manipulate sounds. Phonics instruction is teaching children to identify sounds associated with letters in isolation. Throughout this process, students are encouraged to put these isolated sounds together to form words (Stein & Johnson, 1999). When students have mastered correspondence between some letters and sounds, including one or two vowels, they are able to read unknown words by blending known sounds together.

One common mistake educators make is confusing phonics with phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is being aware of the auditory sounds made by individual letters. This understanding is essential for learning to read an alphabetic language because it these elementary sounds that letters represent. Without the

awareness of these common sounds, phonics can make no sense, and the spellings of words can only be memorized (Adams, et al., 1997). If students cannot hear and manipulate the sounds in spoken words, they have an extremely difficult time mapping those sounds to letters and letter patterns.

Although there is some debate over the effectiveness of phonics instruction, research has shown it to be successful. Swerling (1998) suggested that phonics has a positive relationship with beginning reading. Explicit teaching of phonics, especially as a component of a reading program appears to improve reading achievement.

In addition, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and other researchers have found that teaching word decoding skills benefits beginning readers immensely. Phonics instruction is important to deficient readers because it provides them with a useful decoding strategy. Investigators agree that phonics should be a part of a broader program of reading instruction (Coles, 1987).

Other research shows that teaching phonics in the primary grades tends to produce generally better readers. A large portion of the words that children read in the early grades should be decodable and conform to the phonics they have already been taught. Phonics instruction is systematic. It gradually builds from basic elements to more subtle and complex patterns. The goal is to bridge words they already know to new words they have never experienced (Cunningham, 1995).

The main principle behind the Wright Group's program is an integrated, balanced language approach, combining the direct instruction of basic skills with learning opportunities that allow every child to explore literature and become successful in reading, writing, and learning. One concept on which the Wright program is based

consists of activities that develop children's language skills. Any experience can serve as the basis for language exploration: a shared reading of a story, a poem, observations of a tree, or a class pet. A second concept behind the Wright program is in using exploration to help children realize there is an interrelationship between talking, listening, reading, and writing. Language exploration often extends the reading of a story across the curriculum; a third concept that can reinforce what is learned in the shared experience within the classroom.

The ongoing, authentic assessment system serves to inform teachers and administrators about instruction. This system provides information to teachers and administrators about instruction, informs parents about student progress, and provides for the community a sense of accountability.

Project Objectives and Processes

As a result of implementing a phonics instructional program during the period of January 2001 through May 2001, students in the targeted kindergarten and second grade classrooms will increase their ability to recognize beginning consonant sounds in reading classes. Individual running records, The Wright Group assessment tools, and samples of collected student work will measure the outcome. In order to accomplish the desired learner objective, the following processes are necessary:

1. Materials emphasizing beginning consonant sounds will be selected and implemented in reading classes.
2. Lesson plans that provide a variety of instructional approaches to facilitate student learning will be developed and included into the daily schedule.

3. Extension activities supporting the targeted, beginning, consonant sounds will be developed, prepared, planned, and implemented in reading groups.

As a result of a phonics instructional program implemented between January 2001 and May 2001, the kindergarten and second grade students from the targeted classrooms will improve upon their ability to decipher short and long vowel sounds and vowel digraphs in selected reading literature and activities. These increases will be measured by individual running records, The Wright Group assessment tools, and gathered samples of student work. In order to achieve the determined learner objective, the following processes are required:

1. Material designed specifically on vowel sounds will be selected and implemented into the reading curriculum.

2. A variety of instructional approaches teaching the different vowel sounds and patterns will be developed to meet individual learning styles.

3. Direct and explicit phonetic activities providing for transfer of knowledge will be designed and scheduled for students.

As a result of emphasizing phonics instruction throughout January 2001 and May 2001, the students in the targeted kindergarten and second grade classrooms will improve in their ability to discriminate whole words, recognize and apply rhyming words, and count syllables. These increases will be measured by individual running records, The Wright Group assessment tools, and collected samples of student work.

In order to research the specified objective, the following processes are essential:

1. Materials containing repetitive activities on rhyming words and syllabication will be gathered and implemented into reading classes.

2. Learning activities addressing rhyming words and syllabication will be developed and incorporated into the reading curriculum.
3. Lesson plans designed around rhyming words and syllabication will be scheduled daily.

Project Action Plan

The researchers will continue the existing reading curriculum, which consists of a basal reader and guided reading trade books. The researchers will implement The Wright Skills, a supplemental phonics instructional program. The intervention is published by The Wright Group, which also provides the trade books used during guided reading instruction.

The intervention program will be implemented with one Kindergarten and two-second grade classrooms. The intervention will take place two times per week for duration of twenty to thirty minutes. Pretest assessments will be administered the week of January 15, 2001 and will conclude with a post-assessment the week of May 7, 2001.

Second Grade Action Plan

I. Fall 2000

A. Create materials

1. Teacher Questionnaire (Appendix)
2. Table for responses

B. Collect Materials

1. Wright Group Books
2. Wright Skills Folders
3. Pre-Assessment and Post-Assessment Inventory

II. January 16 – January 19

A. Administer pre-assessment inventory

B. Hand out teacher questionnaire
C. Explain program to students

III. January 22 – January 29 (Phonetic Skill – Vowel Digraph ee/ea)

A. Read A Hike in the Trees
B. Brainstorm a list of words from the story that have the long e-ee/ea vowel pair
C. Complete "Sweet Dreams" black line master as a group

IV. January 29 – February 2 (Phonetic Skill – Vowel Digraph oa/ow vowel pair)

A. Read Meow Meow Gets Out
B. Write and illustrate silly sentences on sentence strips using various oa and ow words

V. February 5 – February 9 (Phonetic Skill – Vowel Digraph ou)

A. Read City Mouse, Country Mouse
B. Pair children with a learning buddy and together they search the story and record the different ou sounding words they find

VI. February 12 – February 16 (Review vowel digraphs)

A. Brainstorm words that have the ee, ea, oa, ow and ou vowel pairs
B. Make bingo cards using the brainstorming words
C. Play bingo

VII. February 19 – February 23 (Phonetic Skill – Vowel Digraph oo)

A. Read Crook by the Brook
B. Make oo word chains

VIII. February 26 – March 2 (Phonetic Skill – Diphthongs ew, ue)

A. Read The Blue Fruit Pie
B. Make word slides

IX. March 5 – March 9 (Review oo, ew, ue)

A. White board word races
B. Spelling quiz

X. March 12 – March 16 (Phonetic Skill – r-controlled a and r-controlled o)

A. Read Farm Party

B. Make star mobiles
C. Read A Stormy Story
D. Making words lesson with "or"

XI. March 19 – March 23 (Phonetic Skills – r-controlled e, i, and u)

A. Read The Summer Mermaid
B. Complete newspaper hunt for er, ir, ur words
C. Spelling game

XII. April 2 – April 6 (Review r-controlled vowels)

A. Word family team game
B. Choose a word from the list generated from the game to write about

XIII. April 9 – April 13 (Prefixes un-, dis-, and re-)

A. Read On Our Way
B. Illustrate word pairs

XIV. April 16 – April 20 (Phonetic Skill – Vowel digraphs oi, oy)

A. Read A Royal Deal
B. Complete word scramble
C. Making words lesson – featuring oi, oy words

XV. April 23 – April 27 (Contractions)

A. Play contraction concentration game
B. Rewrite a given poem using appropriate contractions

XVI. April 30 – May 4 (Review prefixes oi, oy, and contractions)

A. Play prefixes puzzle game
B. Make contraction mobiles
C. Oi/Oy tic-tac-toe

XVII. May 7 – May 11

A. Administer post-assessment inventory
B. Compile data

Project Action Plan for Kindergarten

I. Fall 2000

A. Create materials

1. Teacher Questionnaire (Appendix)
2. Table for responses

B. Collect Materials

1. Wright Group Books
2. Phonemic Awareness Videos and supplements
3. Phonics instruction video and supplements
3. Pre-Assessment and Post-Assessment Inventory

II. January 16 – January 19

A. Administer pre-assessment inventory
B. Hand out teacher questionnaire

III. January 22 – January 29

A. Play alphabet bingo
B. Play alphabet matching game

IV. January 29 – February 2

A. Letter sort game
B. Write letters in shaving cream

V. February 5 – February 9

A. Wikki stick letters
B. Letter sounds bingo

VI. February 12 – February 16

A. Writing activity – create Valentine's Day cards for families; focus on sounds of letters during activity
B. Letter search game

VII. February 19 – February 23

A. Rhyming sounds writing activity
B. Word families matching game

VIII. February 26 – March 2

A. Alpha tiles activity
B. Magnetic letters

IX. March 5 – March 9

A. Spelling bee bingo
B. Write letters in pudding

X. March 12 – March 16

A. Tactile letters
B. Beginning sounds worksheet

XI. March 19 – March 23

A. Video – Rock 'n Learn Letter Sounds
B. Video – Rock 'n Learn Alphabet

XII. April 2 – April 6

A. Circle song – "Can you clap the beats?" clapping beats (syllables) of names
B. Circle song – "I Love Somebody," saying sounds of name slowly to listen for sounds put together.

XIII. April 9 – April 13

A. Sing along and learn the alphabet – songs for each letter
B. Magic letter day – replace beginning letter in names with magic letter of the day

XIV. April 16 – April 20

A. Continuation of sing along and learn the alphabet
B. Letter/sound awareness – chart poem and circle letters (ex: Simple Simon for letter Ss)

XV. April 23 – April 27

A. Alphabet sound tracks game – match tongue twisters to cards (similar to bingo)
B. Letter collage – items beginning with the letter sound

XVI. April 30 – May 4

A. Name that sound game – matching pictures to sounds
B. File folder games for letter recognition
C. Learning Basic Skills video

XVII. May 7 – May 11

A. Administer post-assessment inventory
B. Compile data

Methods of Assessment

In order to assess the effects of the intervention, pretests and posttests covering the skills identified for reading will be administered. The researchers will choose assessments, which correlate with the grade level expectations. Running records, which are used for assessing guided reading at second grade level, will be incorporated. A running record is an assessment tool for coding, scoring, analyzing a child's precise reading behaviors (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). The process of taking a running record is very simple. The teacher sits beside a child as the child reads a text. The text is usually one that the child has read once or twice before. The instructor watches closely as the student reads, coding behaviors on a separate form or on a blank piece of paper. The teacher does not intervene; the role being one of a neutral observer. The running record process allows the teacher to look closely at reading behavior of a student. The teacher can observe three major categories: meaning, structure, and visual information. An assessment published by The Wright Group will serve as the pre- and post-assessments. All expectations will be determined using the scope and sequence of the current reading basal which is Houghton-Mifflin. Random samples of student work will be collected throughout the intervention period to serve as evidence of reading achievement.

Effective and efficient use of these assessment measures easily captures the changing reading process of each child that is taught.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

The objective of this project was to improve the reading abilities of the targeted kindergarten and second grade students. Making reading enjoyable and meaningful to the kindergarten and second grade students while helping them to achieve reading success was a priority of the teacher- researchers. A variety of interventions, with a focus on phonics, were chosen to increase students' reading abilities.

The intervention used to improve the second grade student's reading abilities was The Wright Skills Program. The Wright Skills Program had these components: teacher lesson plans that focused on specific phonetic skills, word family and rhyming flashcards, and activity sheets to accompany each phonetic lesson. In addition to daily reading group instruction, the researchers provided supplemental lessons and activities geared towards specific phonetic skills. The targeted phonetic skills were chosen from pre-assessment results that indicated areas of student weakness. Lessons were designed around specific phonetic skills. The intervention process began with lessons focused on vowel digraphs. Second grade students were presented with a text that highlighted a specific vowel digraph. The text was read and then an activity was completed to evaluate student

comprehension. The action plan continued with lessons centering on diphthongs, r-controlled vowels, prefixes and suffixes, contractions, and word families. These lessons had the same format. The students read a text emphasizing a particular skill and then completed activities such as writing sentences, playing bingo, making word chains, and playing spelling and word family games. The interventions were implemented twice weekly for a duration of forty-five minutes each time. The educational researchers at the second grade level noticed academic improvements as a result of the action research project. The targeted students improved vowel digraphs and diphthongs, vowel variants, and r-controlled vowels as indicated by the post-assessment data. The students anticipated the supplemental instruction with enthusiasm. Several students made positive remarks such as "I am getting better at reading!" and "I like reading the stories!"

The intervention used to improve kindergarten students' phonemic awareness was also based on the Wright Skills Program. The Wright Skills Program had these components: teacher lesson plans, letter and rhyming flashcards, word family games and activities, and phonemic awareness poems and songs. In addition to daily reading instruction, the researcher implemented various activities that enhanced the learning of letters and sounds. Pre-assessment results indicated that students exhibited weaknesses in the areas of letter and sound recognition. The action plan began with activities in letter recognition that included alphabet bingo and matching games, sorting letters by upper and lower case, creating and singing songs, and watching videos. The intervention addressed several phonemic awareness skills: rhyming words, syllabication, and beginning and ending consonants. The intervention was implemented in the targeted classroom two times per week. The researcher at the kindergarten level observed several

positive outcomes as a result of the intervention. The targeted students improved whole word discrimination, rhyming words recognition and application, and syllabication. The researcher noted an increase in student confidence as they accomplished the targeted skills. The students anticipated weekly activities with such remarks as "When do we get to play bingo again?" and "I really liked that video because it made me dance!"

Presentation and Analysis of Results

In order to assess students' phonetic abilities, the researchers utilized a student assessment developed by The Wright Group to gather data for the 50 second graders targeted in the project. The post-assessment suggested that direct phonetic instruction benefited most of the students. Table 4 displays the number of students performing above and below grade level.

Table 4

Number of Second Grade Students Above or Below Grade Level on the Phonetic Post-Assessment

Concept Phonemic	At or Above Grade Level*	Below Grade Level*
Vowel Digraphs	44	6
Vowel Variants	41	9
Vowel Diphthongs	42	8
R-Controlled Vowels	39	11

* Grade Level is defined by a score of 75% or above on the post-assessment.

After the intervention, more than three-fourths of the students were performing at or above grade level. The weakest phonetic concept was consistent with the pre-assessment being r-controlled vowels. Twenty-two percent of students scored below

grade level. This is a decrease from 60% prior to the intervention.

The most dramatic improvement occurred with the phonetic concept of vowel digraphs. Pre-assessment results indicated that only 46% of students were performing at or above grade level. Post-assessment results indicated that 88% of students were performing at or above grade level following the interventions.

In order to assess students' phonetic abilities, the researchers utilized a student assessment developed by The Wright Group to gather data for the 22 kindergarten students targeted in the project. The post-assessment suggested that direct phonetic instruction benefited most of the students. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Number of Kindergarten Students Scoring Above or Below Grade Level on the Phonetic Post-Assessment

Phonetic Concept	At or Above Grade Level*	Below Grade Level*
Whole Word Discrimination	18	4
Rhyming Words – Recognitions	17	5
Rhyming Words – Application	17	5
Syllable Counting	15	7

* Grade Level is defined by a score of 75% or above on the post-assessment.

After the intervention, 81% scored above grade level for discriminating whole words. Syllable counting was the weakest phonetic skill, which was consistent with the pre-assessment. Thirty-two percent of students scored below grade level during syllable counting. This was a decrease from 91% prior to the intervention.

The most dramatic improvement occurred with the phonetic concept of recognizing rhyming words. Pre-assessment results indicated that only 9% of students were performing at or above grade level. Post–assessment results indicated that 68% of students were performing at or above grade level following the intervention.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the educational researchers' concern over students' lack of ability to retain and use the reading skills taught prompted the need to investigate the causes and possible solutions for such a problem. Based on the analysis of the data, the action research team concluded that repeated exposure to phonics may have helped to develop a better understanding and transfer of skills into reading. The data collected reflected the second grade students' growth and development, as well as that of the kindergarten students, over a 20-week period. Running records used in guided reading at the second grade level showed improvement in word recognition and reading fluency. The Wright Group assessment showed improvement in specific areas such as vowel digraphs, variants, and diphthongs, and r-controlled vowels. The action research team found that most students who were actively engaged in phonetic learning activities were able to retain skills and concepts and transfer them into the area of reading. The results show a greater advantage to using integrated teaching methods versus teaching skills in isolation. Actively engaged students develop the ability to transfer skills needed to piece together information across subject areas.

One of the challenges the action plan research team encountered was creating and maintaining a variety of activities related to phonics instruction. The team had to adjust the teaching methods used and develop a method of integrating phonetic skills throughout

the lessons presented. Another challenge was to help the second grade and kindergarten students understand how to use new knowledge in meaningful situations. Carrying the targeted phonetic skills into the area of reading was the goal. For example, when the second grade researchers introduced the vowel digraphs, the researchers brainstormed ideas to integrate the skill into extension activities. For the vowel digraph "oo", the researchers had second grade students make word chains containing "oo" words. At the kindergarten level, when the researcher introduced the letter "Dd" the students practiced writing the letter in chocolate pudding. The challenge for the team was to promote learning while actively engaging students in meaningful discovery.

The teacher- researchers observed several rewards as a result of the action research project. Most of the targeted second grade and kindergarten students improved their phonetic skills and developed a love for reading. The students anticipated reading groups and one kindergarten student even stated, "We do fun stuff when we read!" The students worked cooperatively in grade level groups, and as a result, many improved their social skills. The researchers noted an increase in reading confidence as they accomplished the targeted phonetic skills.

The results of the action research plan indicate that repeated exposure to phonics is needed to produce successful readers. The interventions selected gave the targeted students the success the researchers knew they could have. For students to be successful in school, educators must continue to grow and develop their knowledge and understanding. If educators find passion in their teaching, they will entice children to be passionate about learning. For students to achieve a strong educational foundation, professionals must strive to continue to utilize the best practices and means available for

the students.

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APPENDIX

Teacher Questionnaire

1 Always

2 Sometimes

3 Seldom

4 Never

1. My students have time daily for independent reading.	1	2	3	4
2. I use skill and strategy lessons during reading instruction.	1	2	3	4
3. I include phonics skills during reading instruction.	1	2	3	4